

A Re-evaluation of Ideas, Interests and Politics in Repeal: the Case of the Belgian Corn Laws, 1834-1873

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Abstract

Economic interests, the influence of economic ideas and politics have been put forward in the literature as explanations for the British Repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846. In this paper, we will evaluate these competing explanations using the case of the liberalization of Belgian corn tariffs. The Belgian protectionist Corn Laws of 1834 were abolished in different steps between 1845 and 1873. The first part of this paper uses quantitative methods to assess the success of party affiliation, personal interests and the economic profile of the constituencies in predicting voting behavior. Thanks to the detailed censuses of 1846 on agriculture, industry and population, it is possible to typify the economic make-up of the electoral districts in much more detail than in the British case. However, the analysis of roll-call voting proves that party affiliation and personal and constituency economic interests are insufficient to explain the shift towards free trade. The second part of the paper then discusses the role played by political strategy and ideas in the liberalization of corn tariffs, using a qualitative analysis of the debates on tariff policy. The large number of votes over a forty year period allows us to document the relationship between ideas and interests in a new way.

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1. The British Repeal puzzle and the Belgian case

The 1846 Repeal of the Corn Laws in Great Britain was a fascinating political event generating an impressive amount of historical and political studies.³ The explanation of this famous episode of British political and economic history is still a moot point in present day literature on the subject. The Corn Laws were repealed in 1846 by a conservative government that was backed by a sound majority of conservatives and aristocratic landowners in Parliament. Repeal therefore seemingly eludes standard theoretical accounts of the formation of commercial policy, that puts political survival, pressure groups and the median voter at centre stage.⁴

Up to the 1980s much research interpreted Repeal as the result of the force of ideas. The quantitative analysis of Repeal by William Aydelotte in the 1960s proved that voting behavior in the House of Commons could not be explained by reference to personal pecuniary interests of the representatives.⁵ In the mind of different authors, Repeal was a clear case of the influence of ideas on economic policy formation. William Grampp pointed to the declaration of Parliament in 1820 which introduced free trade as the guiding principle of commercial policy. The subsequent changes in commercial policy were nothing more than the execution of that principle. According to Grampp both Tories and Whigs were convinced that free trade would increase per capita real income.⁶ Charles Kindleberger, in turn, found that all European governments used free trade as a reaction to different stimuli between 1820 and 1870, while after 1873 they all reacted differently to the same stimuli (the industrial crisis and the agricultural invasion). He therefore contended that around 1850 the countries of Europe “moved to free trade for ideological or perhaps better doctrinal reasons.”⁷ Douglas Irwin maintained that

³ For a review of the secondary literature, see: Schonhardt-Bailey, “Introduction,” pp. 39-44 and Schonhardt-Bailey, *From the Corn Laws to Free Trade*.

⁴ Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy*; Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action*; Magee, “Endogenous Protection: the Empirical Evidence,” pp. 526-561.

⁵ Aydelotte, “The Country Gentlemen and the Repeal of the Corn Laws,” p. 51.

⁶ Grampp, “Economic Opinion When Britain Turned to Free Trade,” p. 502 and Grampp, “How Britain Turned to Free Trade,” p. 86.

⁷ Kindleberger, “The Rise of Free Trade in Western Europe,” pp. 31, 36 and 49-51 (citation on p. 51).

since Prime Minister Robert Peel had a pivotal role in Repeal, his sympathy for political economy made economic ideas important for Repeal itself.⁸

The last twenty years have been marked by a renewed interest in Corn Law Repeal by political scientists using sophisticated statistical methods of roll-call analysis to evaluate an explanation of Repeal based on economic interests. Two authors working with this analytical tool have pointed to the insufficiency of economic interests. In 1989 Timothy McKeown complemented Aydelotte's dataset with some independent variables on the economic make-up of constituencies. McKeown concluded that rapid economic changes created a situation where a majority could be found in support of Corn Law abolition. But economic changes did not lead directly to changes in public policy, for the anti-protectionists consisted of Irish Repealers and Peelites, and neither had undergone drastic economic changes in the years before. McKeown thus points to broader political concerns playing their part in Repeal.⁹ Like the previous author, Iain McLean and Camilla Bustani concluded from their roll-call analysis of 1846 that mainstream public choice is insufficient to explain Repeal. McLean and Bustani measured the influence of interests and ideology (defined as an attitude towards religion) on the voting behavior of the conservatives. They concluded that interests were important, but ideology was more important. They pointed in particular to the role of Peel, who had lost faith in the Corn Laws and used the Irish famine as a political strategy to change the Corn Laws issue from a purely economic one to politics.¹⁰

In a series of recent publications Cheryl Schonhardt-Bailey regenerated an explanation of Repeal in terms of public choice. First, she rightly showed that the changes in British economic structure also influenced the stakes for the landowners. The capital portfolios of the landed elite were diversified by

⁸ Irwin, "Political Economy and Peel's Repeal of the Corn Laws," pp. 41-59.

⁹ McKeown, "The Politics of Corn Law Repeal and Theories of Commercial Policy," pp. 353-380.

¹⁰ McLean and Bustani, "Irish Potatoes and British Politics," pp. 817-836 and McLean, "Rational Choice and the Victorian Voter," pp. 496-515. Other authors also pointed to political factors in Repeal, notably the motive of institutional preservation and the leadership of Peel. See Kitson Clark, "The Repeal of the Corn Laws and the Politics of the Forties," pp. 1-13 and Lusztig, "Solving Peel's Puzzle," pp. 393-408.

investments in industry, lessening their penchant for protectionism.¹¹ Next, Schonhardt-Bailey attempted to measure the combined effects of interest, party affiliation and MPs' personal ideology in a single model. Based on this analysis Schonhardt-Bailey presented the Conservative party as a coalition between two interest-based alliances, with a shared concern for retaining protectionism. Non-Peelite Conservatives mostly represented agricultural districts and had no incentive to follow Peel's move for Repeal. The Peelites represented districts with comparatively more free-trade leaning interests. Before 1846, Peelites voted according to a general Conservative protectionist ideology, but in 1846 they were set free by Peel to follow the median voter of their district who was leaning towards free trade.¹² Thus it was not ideology that made Repeal possible, but rather the liberation from ideology.

In this paper we evaluate the adequacy of economic interests to explain the liberalization of agricultural trade in the middle of the nineteenth century, using the Belgian case. The question is if economic changes necessarily lead to changes in economic policy, as Nobel prize winner George Joseph Stigler wrote: "*If Cobden had spoken only Yiddish, and with a stammer, and Peel had been a narrow, stupid man, England would have moved toward free trade in grain as its agricultural classes declined and its manufacturing and commercial classes grew.*"¹³ Specifically for the Belgian situation after 1875, Swinnen et al. have analyzed the correlation between variations in prices and changes in agricultural protection.¹⁴ For Swinnen et al., the mechanism connecting prices and tariffs remains a theoretical black box based on economic interests. It is exactly this black box that we want to open using data on the individual votes of Belgian representatives in the years 1834-1873.

¹¹ Schonhardt-Bailey, "Specific Factors, Capital Markets, Portfolio Diversification, and Free Trade," pp. 545-569.

¹² Schonhardt-Bailey, "Linking Constituency Interests to Legislative Voting Behaviour," pp. 115-117; Schonhardt-Bailey, "Ideology, Party and Interests in the British Parliament of 1841-47," pp. 603-604 and Schonhardt-Bailey, *From the Corn Laws to Free Trade*.

¹³ Stigler, *The Economist as Preacher*, p. 64. Cited in: Irwin, "Political Economy and Peel's Repeal," p. 41.

¹⁴ Swinnen, Banerjee and De Groter, "Economic development, institutional change, and the political economy of agricultural protection," pp. 25-43.

The Belgian case is interesting for three reasons. First, our analysis of Belgian roll-call votes is the first on the same subject and in the same timeframe as British Repeal. The comparison is justified because Belgium was the earliest country on the continent affected by industrialization. In the regions of Mons, Charleroi and Liège coal mining and metallurgical industry flourished. In Verviers, which was called the Manchester of the continent, a mechanized woolens industry was established.¹⁵ The provisional results of the historical national accounting project show that the share of agriculture in GDP decreased from 30% in 1810 to 18% in 1870. The share of industry on the other hand increased from 16% to 40% in the same years.¹⁶ The step to free trade in foodstuffs around 1850 then seems logical. The political scientist Pascale Delfosse indeed argued that the discussions on Belgian agricultural protectionism were the result of a clear-cut opposition between landed elites defending their interests in a rapidly changing economy and representatives of the new industrial and urban society.¹⁷

Second, the Belgian case is interesting because of the detailed data available on the economic background of the electoral districts. In 1846, the Belgian Central Statistical Bureau, led by the famous statistician Adolphe Quetelet, organized a census of population, agriculture and industry. This data allows for a much more precise economic characterization of the constituencies than in the British case.¹⁸ Schonhardt-Bailey and McLean and Bustani had to use quantifications of broad verbal descriptions to characterize the economic profile of each constituency. McKeown had to settle for agricultural variables from the year 1866, twenty years after Repeal. Moreover, his data are often at

¹⁵ Van der Herten, Oris and Roegiers, *Nijver België*, pp. 31-32; Van der Wee and Veraghtert, “De economie van 1814 tot 1944,” pp. 184-192; Kurgan-Van Hentenrijk, “Industriële ontwikkeling,” pp. 34-42; De Keyser, “Brussel en zijn rand,” pp. 53-76. Oris, “Le contexte économique et social,” pp. 37-70.

¹⁶ Horlings and Smits, “A Comparison of the Pattern of Growth and Structural Change,” p. 87.

¹⁷ Delfosse’s analysis was based on the economic characteristics of the nine Belgian provinces. This method, however, does not allow for such clear conclusions about an opposition between the countryside and the industrial cities. Our paper works with the forty one electoral districts, which is more precise. Delfosse, *La politique agricole de l’État belge*; Delfosse, “État, crises alimentaires et modernisation de l’agriculture,” pp. 71-95 and Delfosse, “La face cachée de l’unionisme,” pp. 117-146.

¹⁸ On Quetelet read: Mosselmans, “Adolphe Quetelet, the Average Man,” pp. 565-582.

county rather than at constituency level. Our detailed variables are gathered at the constituency level and are chronologically consistent.

Finally, especially in the work of Schonhardt-Bailey, ideas become a specific factor *next* to interests and parties. They are seen as a residue, that which cannot be explained by public choice or party politics. But this residual collects all unobserved individual variation as well as measuring errors, and it seems inappropriate to label this as ideology or ideas. The Belgian case, in contrast, allows us to clearly establish (but not measure) the importance of economic ideas as a component of interests. This is more in line with literature by Keohane, Goldstein, Blyth and Jacobsen on the relation between interests and ideas.¹⁹ These authors point to the complexity of society and the resulting uncertainty of the actors about the right policy choices. Interests are the result of an economic position mitigated by an interpretation of that position, which is colored by ideas. It is therefore difficult, if not impossible, to separate ideas from interests. The large number of roll-calls on the corn laws in Belgium and the extensive debates in Parliament between 1834 and 1873 make it possible to trace changes in the representatives' perception regarding the economic interests of their districts.

In section 2 we will first review the development of Belgian tariffs for corn between 1834 and the step to complete free trade in corn in 1873. In section 3 we will present the econometric analysis of representatives' voting behavior. In section 4 we will point out the working of ideas in the evolution towards free trade.

¹⁹ Goldstein and Keohane, *Ideas and Foreign Policy*, pp. 4-5 and 112-113; Jacobsen, "Much Ado About Ideas," p. 290; and Blyth, *Great Transformations*.

2. From agricultural protection to free trade in Belgium, 1834-

1873²⁰

Figure 1 depicts the evolution of the yearly price averages of wheat, rye and potatoes for the period 1830-1890, as well as the dates of the votes on the corn laws under consideration (dotted vertical lines).²¹ From this figure it appears that the Belgian legislators did not simply react to price changes. The law of 22 February 1850 in particular is enigmatic because it buried the protectionist sliding scale law while prices were low. Conversely the price dip around 1865 did not automatically produce any legislation.²²

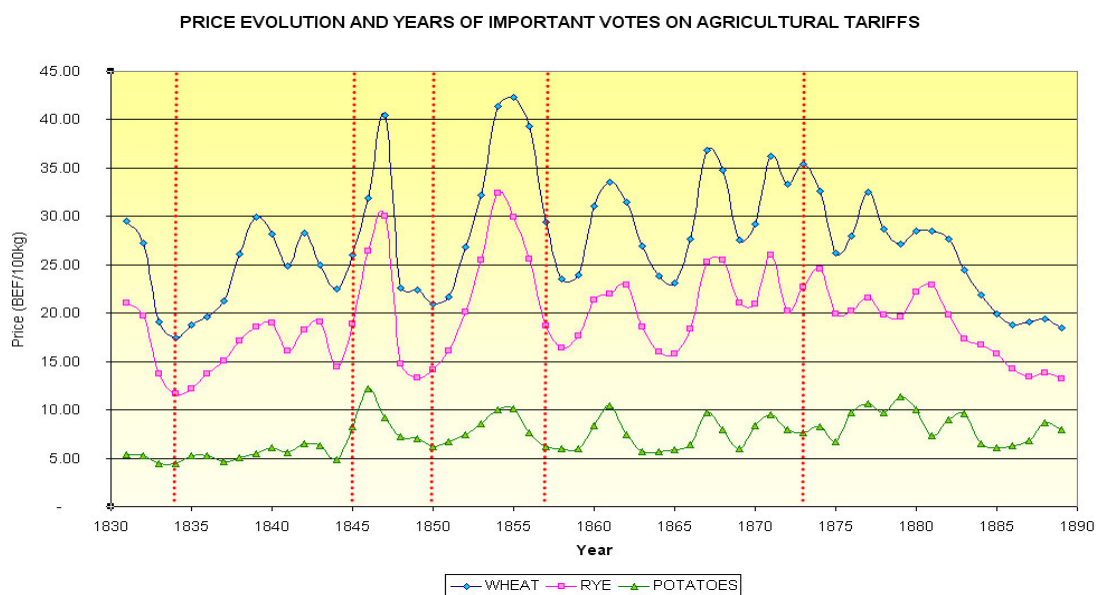


Figure 1. Source: Gadisseur, *Le produit physique*, pp. 756-761.

²⁰ For a full discussion of the legislation, read: Van Dijck, *De wetenschap van de wetgever*, chapter 8. In this article only the tariffs for corn are treated, but the analyzed laws also included tariffs for rye, spelt, oats, potatoes, macaroni, rice, beans, etc. The tariffs of these other foodstuffs were determined based on their value respective to that of corn. The laws after 1845 also included tariffs for livestock.

²¹ The prices are not corrected for inflation since this was not an issue in the period under consideration. Segers, *Economische groei en levensstandaard*, pp. 341-345.

²² Some older literature on agricultural tariffs exists, but these authors confined themselves to a, sometimes erroneous, factual overview of tariff legislation. Van Bocxlaer, "De afschaffing van de schaalwetten," pp. 443-444; Suetens, *Histoire de la politique commerciale*, pp. 61-62. Vander Vaeren, *Les faits principaux de l'histoire de l'agriculture belge*; Loridan, "Esquisse de la politique douanière," pp. 319-323.

After Belgian independence in 1830 the prices of wheat and rye started to fall because of good harvests, sparking demands for agricultural protection.²³ The protectionist law of 31 July 1834 introduced a sliding scale inspired by the British Corn Law of 1828. As the prices of wheat and rye went down, a progressive import tariff would be levied. At a price of 19 Belgian frank (BEF) for 100 kg the highest tariff of 7,5 BEF was levied (39% ad valorem). If the prices went under 15 BEF, imports became prohibited altogether. Above a certain threshold level imports were free. In the case of extremely high prices export became prohibited. The idea of the sliding scale law's architects was to guarantee agricultural producers a minimum price that was considered as remunerative. In 1844 the prices of wheat and rye once more descended to an alarming level, sparking calls for a more restrictive protectionist law. In February 1845 twenty-one members of the House of Commons introduced a bill that became known as the "Law of famine". It had the intention of guaranteeing corn producers even higher prices than the 1834 law by introducing two new scales.

However, this pinnacle of agricultural protectionism was never promulgated because of the subsistence crisis of 1845-1848. The first reports on the failure of the potato crop became known in July 1845. The next year, the rye harvest failed. The crisis was marked by the continuation of extremely high prices until 1848 (see figure 1) causing hardship for a large majority of the population. The outbreak of cholera in 1848 left many dead.²⁴ The government suspended the sliding scale law in September 1845. Temporary measures left the import of foodstuffs free until 1850. The yearly renewable measures also prohibited the export of foodstuffs between 1845 and 1848.

After the end of the subsistence crisis, the temporary laws were replaced by the law of 22 February 1850 that fixed the new agricultural tariffs for an indefinite period. The law was an important step towards free trade, but also showed many signs of a compromise. The genesis of the definitive law was long and complex. It was not the liberal government of Charles Rogier that pushed for a

²³ Vandenpeereboom, *Du gouvernement représentatif en Belgique*, vol. 1, p. 144.

²⁴ For an overview of the subsistence crisis of 1845-1850, see: Jacquemyns, *Histoire de la crise économique des Flandres* and Vanhaute, "So Worthy an Example to Ireland," pp. 123-148.

definitive free trade law, although it did oppose the sliding scale.²⁵ When the prices began to descend at the end of 1848, Rogier wanted to extend the temporary measures, officially until the consequences of British Repeal, which took effect in February 1849, became clear.²⁶ At the end of 1849, Rogier proposed a new bill that prolonged the temporary measures for two years. However, by this time the prices of wheat and rye had once more descended to alarming levels that pushed the agricultural protectionists into action. The Parliamentary commission studying the bill argued that agriculture should receive protection as long as industry remained guarded from competition.²⁷ During the lengthy discussions in the House of Representatives that led to the law of 22 February 1850, it was decided that this law would become definitive. The tariff for wheat was brought to 1 BEF per 100 kg, the equivalent of a duty of 4,8% ad valorem for the average price of 1850.

The law of 22 February 1850 can be characterized as a mixed triumph. It meant the end of the sliding scale of 1834 and is therefore the equivalent of British Repeal. Yet many representatives that had argued in favor of free trade during the discussions voted against the law because they thought that the tariff of 1 BEF was too high. Many protectionists also voted against because they hoped for the return of a protectionist sliding scale.

Belgian agricultural tariff history becomes even more complicated as the “permanent” law of 1850 did not last long. A new subsistence crisis struck between 1853 and 1857. Prices soared because of bad harvests from 1853 to 1855 and difficulties with the imports of foodstuffs during the Crimean War (1854-1856). Prices even rose above the level of 1845-1848.²⁸ The government reverted to the typical temporary crisis measures of free imports and export prohibition in yearly renewable laws.

²⁵ When meeting Richard Cobden in Berlin on 29 July 1847, the Belgian ambassador Jean-Baptiste Nothomb, who was previously a cabinet minister, described Rogier as a free-trader. Cobden and Taylor, *The European Diaries of Richard Cobden*, pp. 165-166.

²⁶ “Denrées alimentaires. Exposé des motifs,” *Parliamentary Documents of the House of Representatives*, 7 November 1848, nr. 12, pp. 56-57. All the references to Parliamentary proceedings and documents after 1845 can be looked up on the website of the Belgian House of Representatives: www.dekamer.be.

²⁷ “Denrées alimentaires. Rapport fait, au nom de la section centrale, par M. Rousselle,” *Parliamentary Documents of the House of Representatives*, 11 December 1849, nr. 26, pp. 202-204.

²⁸ Delfosse, “État, crises alimentaires et modernisation de l’agriculture,” pp. 71-95 and “Denrées alimentaires. Exposé de motifs,” *Parliamentary Documents of the House of Representatives*, 15 November 1855, nr. 5, pp. 49-55.

The Catholic Prime Minister Pieter De Decker, a known free trade proponent,²⁹ moved for a new permanent law at the end of 1856. According to contemporary economists, the law of 5 February 1857 inaugurated an era of free trade in Belgian corn tariffs.³⁰ The law left a tariff of 0,5 BEF for 100 kg of wheat (1,7% ad valorem in the high prices of 1857).

The law of 5 February 1857 functioned until a new period of high prices in 1871-1873. At that time a Catholic government removed all remaining duties on foodstuffs. The law of 2 January 1873 was accepted unanimously in the House of Representatives.

3. An econometric analysis of representatives' voting behavior

Our empirical analysis seeks to quantify and disentangle the relative importance of personal economic interests, party affiliation and the economic interests of the constituency for representatives' votes on the Belgian corn laws in the period 1834-1873. We study the voting behavior on five laws: the sliding scale law of 1834, the law of famine of 1845, the Repeal law of 1850, the law that lowered the tariff to 0,5 BEF in 1857 and the removal of all remaining tariffs in 1873.³¹ The first four roll-call votes will be analyzed quantitatively. Because the removal tariffs in 1873 was unanimous, it is analyzed qualitatively in section 4.

²⁹ De Hesselle, "Du mouvement libre échangiste en Belgique," pp. 65-66.

³⁰ A. [Giovanni Arrivabene], "De la liberté du commerce des grains," pp. 1-2.

³¹ The text of the laws can be found in *Pasinomie: collection complète des lois*. Brussels: Bruylant 1789-. 1) 31 July 1834, nr. 626, pp. 171-173. 2) 1845: this bill was never published. 3) 22 February 1850, nr. 91, p. 44. 4) 5 February 1847, nr. 40, pp. 23-24. 5) 3 January 1873, nr. 3, p. 6.

3.1 Data

The votes of the MPs in the roll-call votes are collected in the published Parliamentary procedures.³²

Only effective votes are considered while the abstentions are disregarded. Table 1 shows the percentages of votes, party affiliation and personal interests in the votes under consideration.

Table 1 : Distribution of votes, party affiliation and personal interests										
Year	Votes			Party affiliation			Personal interests			
	Protectionist	Abstention	Liberalization	Liberal	Catholic	Union	Industry	Land	Mixed	Professions
1834 ³³	66, 7%	0%	33,4%	35,4%	52,1%	12,5%	12,5%	25%	31,3%	31,3%
1845 ³⁴	63,4%	0%	36,6%	42,4%	54,9%	2,8%	14,1%	14,1%	33,8%	38,0%
1850	23,8%	11,3%	65%	72,5%	27,5%	0%	28,8%	15%	30%	26,3%
1857	32,6%	19,8%	47,7%	44,2%	55,8%	0%	22,1%	22,19%	36,1%	18,6%
1873	0%	4,5%	95,5%	34,3%	65,7%	0%	17,9%	20,9%	34,3%	27,6%

The party affiliations of the MPs were collected from several published prosopographies of the members of Belgian Parliament. This information has never been used for a quantitative analysis before.³⁵ Party formation in Belgium was mostly based on the opposition between Catholics and Liberals about the role of the church and religion in public life.³⁶ Party affiliation is represented by three dummy variables: “cath”, “lib” and “union”. The first two dummies stand for the respective attachment to the Catholic and Liberal party. “Union” stands for a political current of Unionists, which aimed at underlining the political unity of Belgium in the first years of independence. The current is of limited importance for our analysis (6 votes in 1834, 2 in 1845) and ceased to exist as

³² 1) Vote on 21 July 1834: *Moniteur Belge*. 22 July 1834. 2) Vote on 7 May 1845: *Chambre des Représentants. Annales Parlementaires (APC)*, p. 1632. 3) 9 February 1850: *APC*, p. 716. 4) 20 December 1856: *APC*, p. 370-371. 5) 21 December 1872: *APC*, p. 260.

³³ The representatives from the constituencies Diekirch, Roermond, Maastricht and Luxembourg were omitted. These constituencies were a part of Belgian territory in 1834, but were transferred to the Netherlands by the Treaty of London (1839). We lack equivalent data to characterize these districts economically. Further, three representatives (from Mechelen, Leuven and Nivelles) were dropped because of missing data about their personal interests.

³⁴ One representative (de Meer de Moorsel from Aalst) was dropped because of missing data on personal interests.

³⁵ De Paepe and Raindorf-Gerard, *Le Parlement belge* and Van Molle, *Het Belgisch Parlement*.

³⁶ Witte, “The battle for monasteries, cemeteries and schools,” pp. 102-128 and De Smaele, “Les partis politiques à la Chambre,” pp. 131-157.

tensions between Catholics and Liberals mounted in the 1840s and 1850s. In line with British literature we expect Catholic representatives (conservatives) to be more in favor of agricultural protection than the Liberals.

Representatives' personal economic interests are identified by the already mentioned prosopographies of Belgian Parliament, supplemented with biographical repertoires on other (mostly local) political institutions.³⁷ The large landowners are found in the list of persons eligible for the Senate. This eligibility was conditional on a high minimal amount of taxes paid, which could in practice only be reached through land taxes.³⁸ Other biographical instruments were employed to find involvement in the industrial sector. The repertory of mandataries in boards of industrial companies was important in this respect.³⁹ The personal economic background of representatives is captured by four mutually exclusive dummy variables: "perland" indicates eligibility to the Senate due to landownership, "perind" indicates presence in the board of industrial and financial companies, "perboth" indicates a combination of landownership and interests in industrial and financial companies. As in Britain, portfolio diversification was a reality in Belgium, where industrial classes invested in property and landowners invested in the financial and industrial sectors.⁴⁰ Finally, "perfree" indicates activity as lawyer, military officer, civil servant (before 1848), notary, doctor, journalist, university professor or engineer (with no large landownership or interests in industrial or financial companies). We expect landowners to be more in favor of agricultural protection and industrialists to prefer free trade as this would allow for lower wages to guarantee subsistence of their workers.

³⁷ Caulier-Mathy, *Le monde des parlementaires liégeois*; Lehoucq and Valcke, *De fonteinen van de oranjeberg*; Schepens, *De Provincieraad van West-Vlaanderen vol. I* and Heylen, De Nil and D'Hondt, *Geschiedenis van de provincie Antwerpen*, vol. II.

³⁸ Stengers, *Index des éligibles au Sénat*.

³⁹ Laureyssens, *Industriële naamloze vennootschappen in België* and Kurgan-Van Hentenryk, *Dictionnaire des patrons en Belgique*.

⁴⁰ De Belder, "Veranderingen in de sociaal-economische positie van de Belgische adel," pp. 483-501.

The constituencies are described economically and demographically by data for the year 1846.⁴¹ The sources and definitions of all constituency variables are discussed extensively in the appendix. The population and industrial censuses of 1846 allow us to capture the urbanization (the share of the population living in cities) and industrialization of the constituencies. The general demographic structure of the constituency is captured by its surface (“*surface*”) and population (“*population*”), the ratio of which constitutes the population density (“*popdensity*”). The variables “*needyrel*” and “*popcitrel*” indicate respectively the percentage of the population living in cities and the percentage officially recognized as needy. The number of needy people is an indicator for poverty and potential political instability (food riots). The industrial capacity of the constituencies is captured by the percentage of the population working in sectors where (private) firms employ on average more than 100 persons (“*indrel100*”). The constituencies are typified electorally by the percentage of voters living in cities before the law of 12 March 1848 (“*cityvoterel7*”) and after the law of 12 March 1848 (“*cityvoterel8*”). The law of 12 March 1848 lowered the amount of taxes payable to obtain voting rights, and was introduced to counteract democratic agitation after the Paris February Revolution of 1848.⁴² It increased the number of voters mainly in more urban constituencies and can thus be part of the explanation of the shift to free trade. The percentage of the population of each constituency having voting rights before and after the law of 12 March 1848 is represented by the variables “*voterel7*” and “*voterel8*”.

We employ the agricultural census to identify the agricultural orientation of each constituency. We know the percentage of the agricultural surface used for growing wheat and rye (“*wheatryerel*”) and potatoes (“*potatoerel*”). We also know the number of “*livestock*” (dairy cows of more than 2 years old and pigs older than 2 months), the percentage of agricultural land owned by the farmers who work it (“*propratio*”, as opposed to leasing) and the percentage of farms working a surface of more

⁴¹ The economic and demographic structure did not change too much in slightly more than a decade before and after that date (votes analyzed quantitatively in 1834, 1845, 1850 and 1857).

⁴² Witte, Craeybeckx and Meynen, *Political History of Belgium*, p. 43 and Van Eenoo, “De evolutie van de kieswetgeving in België,” p. 336.

than 10 hectares (“*surfmagn*”). We expect representatives from constituencies with a specialization in wheat and rye production to be more in favor of agricultural protection. We also expect more support for protectionist measures where more land is leased by farmers, as large landowners would then lobby for protectionism to raise their incomes from leasing out land. The preference of districts specializing in livestock is harder to predict: as consumers of cereals they gain from lower cereal prices, but the laws under consideration in 1850 and 1857 also incorporated the tariffs for livestock. Table 2 depicts the summary statistics of these variables.

Table 2: Summary Statistics Voting Districts (all districts weighted equally)

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
surface	71844	33772	28397	157110
population	105785	69808	26707	376362
popcitrel	21	11.8	0	48.4
needyrel	21.1	10.7	2.04	42
wheatryerel	19.8	10.5	1.63	38
potatoerel	4.91	2.29	1.52	9.61
livestock	26247	11612	9873	62539
propratio	35.2	19.2	7.07	84.9
surfmagn	9.35	4.43	2.61	23.2
indrel100	1.43	2.93	0	12.5
cityvoterel7	30.5	13.9	0	59.6
cityvoterel8	33	16.7	0	68.2
voterel7	1.11	0.247	0.74	2.1
voterel8	1.7	0.344	1.06	2.59

Additionally, we also try to measure the influence of the subsistence crisis. We expect that representatives from constituencies where the subsistence crisis struck hard were more likely to support agricultural trade liberalization. The subsistence crisis is captured by a dummy variable (“*potatocris*”), which is 1 if the percentage of needy exceeds 25% of population and at least 4% of the agricultural land is used to grow potatoes. This dummy collects 14 of the 41 constituencies, grouped in two geographical clusters, where the potato crisis was most severe: East and West Flanders (Aalst, Bruges, Dendermonde, Diksmuide, Ieper, Kortrijk, Ostend, Oudenaarde, Roeselaere

and Tielt; this cluster also includes Ath in the neighboring province of Hainaut) and a smaller region east of Brussels (Leuven, Nivelles and Borgworm).

Table 3: Correlation Matrix (all districts weighted equally)

	popdensity	popcitrel	Cityvoterel7	Cityvoterel8	needyrel	wheatryerel	potatoerel	log(live-stock)	propratio	surfmagn	indrel100
popdensity	1										
popcitrel	0.45	1									
cityvoterel7	0.41	0.93	1								
cityvoterel8	0.49	0.95	0.97	1							
needyrel	0.56	0.15	0.16	0.16	1						
wheatryerel	0.71	0.19	0.17	0.2	0.83	1					
potatoerel	0.76	0.38	0.3	0.36	0.52	0.67	1				
log(livestock)	0.26	0.31	0.27	0.39	0.08	0.24	0.32	1			
propratio	-0.6	-0.48	-0.47	-0.46	-0.67	-0.62	-0.5	-0.06	1		
surfmagn	-0.68	-0.06	-0.07	-0.15	-0.39	-0.51	-0.54	-0.37	0.27	1	
indrel100	0.25	-0.03	0.06	0.09	-0.15	0	-0.13	0.04	-0.02	-0.31	1

Table 3 depicts the correlation matrix. Note how population density correlates positively with the percentage of the population living in cities and the orientation of agriculture towards cereal and potato production. More densely populated constituencies also tend to have a lesser share of land owned by the farmers and of farms working more than 10 hectares of land. The percentages of population and voters living in cities are almost perfectly correlated, so much so that we only employ the latter. The share of the population enrolled as needy is positively correlated with the importance of cereals and potatoes in the constituency's agriculture, which is largely due to the year of the data collection in 1846, at the height of the subsistence crisis.

3.2 General analysis

After omitting nine abstentions in the 1850 vote and seventeen in the 1857 vote, the roll-call votes of 1834, 1845, 1850 and 1857 can be analyzed as a binary variable.⁴³ We apply probit analysis to each vote separately to allow for maximal flexibility and account for differences in the content of the laws. General differences in historical circumstances are, as far as they are orthogonal to our variables, absorbed into the constants of the regressions. Table 4 presents the marginal effects, at the mean, of the probit regression. These marginal effects represent the change in the probability of a vote for trade liberalization due to a unit increase in the relevant variable (at the mean), while all other variables are kept constant at the mean. For dummy variables this unit increase is a dummy change of 0 to 1 (i.e. the representative changing membership from the reference group to the group indicated by the dummy), and for logarithmic variables it concerns a 1% change.

Table 4: Marginal Effects Probit Estimation (at mean)				
	Dependent variable: Vote pro trade liberalization			
	1834	1845	1850	1857
perindus (d)	0.12 (0.33)	0.17 (0.37)	-0.020 (0.17)	0.41*** (0.12)
perfree (d)	0.30 (0.25)	0.17 (0.28)	0.089 (0.13)	0.24 (0.19)
perboth (d)	0.17 (0.39)	0.010 (0.29)	0.12 (0.12)	0.39*** (0.14)
lib (d)	0.60** (0.26)	0.52*** (0.16)	0.77*** (0.16)	-0.11 (0.15)
union (d)	0.41 (0.44)	0.25 (0.49)		
cityvoterel7/8	-0.0015 (0.011)	-0.022* (0.012)	-0.0097 (0.007)	-0.029*** (0.0085)
propratio	0.023** (0.011)	0.0024 (0.010)	-0.0058 (0.0058)	0.026*** (0.0099)
wheatryerel	-0.028* (0.017)	-0.036** (0.017)	-0.016* (0.0085)	-0.0026 (0.013)

⁴³ Since abstentions in 1850 and 1857 were motivated by disappointment with the reached compromise by both highly pro protection and pro liberalization representatives, it is inappropriate to include these abstentions as a single category in e.g. an ordered probit analysis.

log(livestock)	-1.90*	-0.35	-0.80**	-1.29***
	(1.01)	(0.42)	(0.37)	(0.44)
log(population)	2.11**	1.23**	0.30	1.71***
	(1.05)	(0.50)	(0.37)	(0.55)
indrel100	-0.048	-0.037	-0.012	0.042
	(0.033)	(0.029)	(0.025)	(0.040)
surfmagn	0.067	0.03	-0.048*	0.16***
	(0.055)	(0.037)	(0.025)	(0.059)
potatocris(d)			-0.29	
			(0.25)	
N	48	71	71	69
pseudo R-sq	0.59	0.56	0.4	0.4
Marginal effects, Standard errors in parentheses				
(d) for discrete change of dummy variable from 0 to 1				
* p<0.10, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01				

Personal economic background, captured by the first three variables, only affects voting in a way statistically different from zero in the 1857 vote. Representatives with industrial interests are, all other things being kept equal at the mean, 41% more likely to vote for liberalization in the 1857 vote than great landowners (39% if they are also great landowners). In the other votes, the statistical significance is smaller, but the sign of the effect of personal background is similar.⁴⁴ Party affiliation is, except for the 1857 vote in which both the Catholic and Liberal parties were divided, the most important variable in terms of size and statistical significance. All other things being kept constant at the mean, a Liberal representative was in 1834, 1845 and 1850 respectively 60%, 52% and 77% more likely to support agricultural trade liberalization than a Catholic representative. The few Unionist representatives were rather opposed to protectionism.

As for the constituency background, as expected, the share of agricultural land owned by the farmers increases the probability of a vote for trade liberalization in a way statistically different from zero in

⁴⁴ The fact that personal interests were not decisive is obvious since otherwise no agricultural free trade bill could have made it through the Senate, which was completely dominated by the landed interests. However, the bills of 1850, 1857 and 1873 did pass. Van Dijck maintains that the Senate, which was composed of rich landowners precisely to guarantee an independent reflection on the laws passed by the more democratic House of Representatives, could not vote against agricultural free trade because an overtly self-interested vote by the Senate would compromise this institution. Van Dijck, *De wetenschap van de wetgever*, p. 378.

1834 and 1857. The relative importance of wheat and rye production and of the numbers of livestock increases the likelihood of a protectionist vote. The effects of industrialization and the potato crisis are not significantly different from zero. Surprisingly, the probability of a protectionist vote is higher if a greater share of voters (or population) lives in the cities. This suggests that the increased prominence of city voters due to the law of 12 March 1848 was not a factor in Belgium's move towards agricultural trade liberalization. One could conjecture that representatives of the more urbanized constituencies perceived the protectionism of the sliding scale as being in the best interests of their constituents, because rather than harming food supply it prevented production from being exported. The world market was not yet that developed, with imports and exports remaining limited until the 1870s. It was only after 1880 that the agricultural invasion became acutely felt (figure 2).⁴⁵

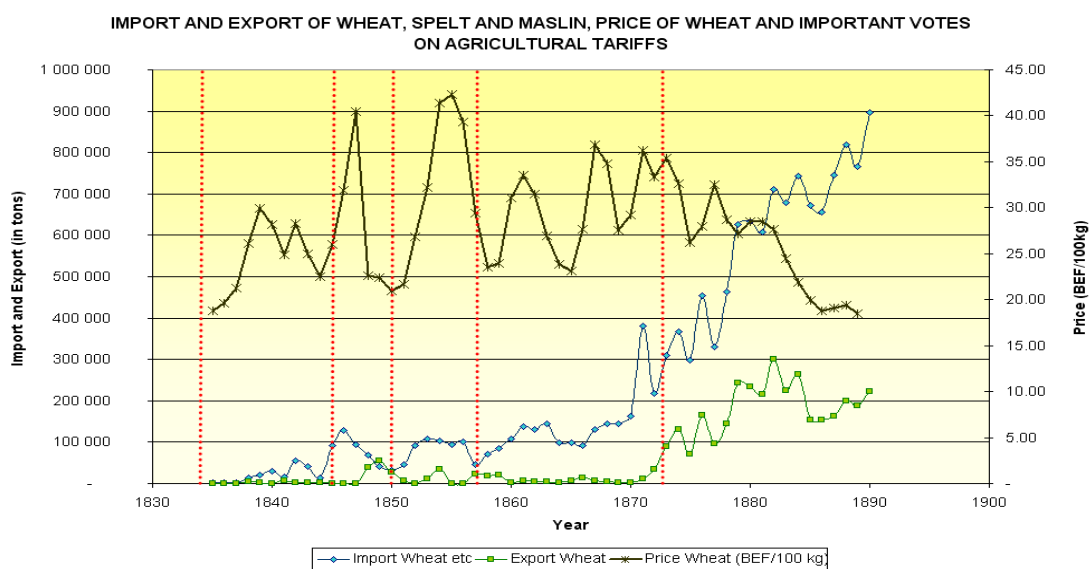


Figure 2. Source: Gadisseur, *Le produit physique*, pp. 756-761 and Degrève, *Le commerce extérieur*, pp. 304-310.

⁴⁵ O'Rourke, "The European Grain Invasion, 1870-1913," pp. 775-801. Leen Van Molle has analysed the reaction of the Belgian government after 1884. Van Molle, *Katholieken en landbouw*.

3.3 Additional analysis of the votes in 1850 and 1857

As already mentioned, the vote on the law of 22 February 1850 was a compromise between the protectionists and the free traders that was not completely acceptable for all parties. A number of radical free trade supporters and protectionists rejected the compromise, influencing the results of our analysis of the 1850-vote. Therefore our analysis of 1850 is complemented here with a review of the votes on three amendments to the bill, during which the whole spectrum of preferences was served and a high number of representatives revealed their preference. On 2 February 1850 all present members of the House of Representatives voted for one of the three tariff options proposed by amendments representing the free trade (0,5 BEF), compromise (1 BEF) and protectionist position (1,5 BEF) (respectively 2,4%, 4,8% and 7,2% expressed ad valorem in prices of 1850).⁴⁶ The marginal effects at the mean of an ordered probit analysis of the votes on the amendments to the 1850 bill are presented in table 5.

**Table 5: Marginal effects (at mean) ordered probit analysis
1850 amendment vote**

	Protectionist Option (1,5 BEF)	Intermediate Option (1 BEF)	Liberalization Option (0,5 BEF)
perindus (d)	-0.32*** (0.11)	0.052 (0.081)	0.27* (0.14)
perfree (d)	-0.15 (0.13)	0.058 (0.043)	0.094 (0.10)
perboth (d)	0.29* (0.17)	-0.17 (0.12)	-0.12* (0.064)
lib (d)	-0.56*** (0.13)	0.37*** (0.13)	0.19*** (0.061)
cityvotere18	0.0081 (0.0058)	-0.0041 (0.0035)	-0.0040 (0.0029)
prop ratio	0.0041	-0.0021	-0.0020

⁴⁶ *APC*, 2 February 1850, pp. 647-648. Preference for 1,5 BEF is the protectionist group; preference for 1 BEF, but not 1,5 BEF is the intermediate group; no vote on the last amendment of 0,5 BEF occurred because the tariff of 1 BEF was accepted, with help from some protectionists who preferred 1 BEF over 0,5 BEF. The representatives that voted against the 1,5 and 1 BEF tariffs are supposed to be in favor of free trade. This can be deduced from their interventions during the debates on the bill. For more background, see: Van Dijck, *De wetenschap van de wetgever*, p. 374-383.

	(0.0053)	(0.0028)	(0.0027)
log(livestock)	0.74**	-0.38	-0.37**
	(0.33)	(0.23)	(0.17)
log(population)	-1.54***	0.78**	0.76***
	(0.39)	(0.38)	(0.24)
wheatryerel	0.040***	-0.020**	-0.020***
	(0.011)	(0.0099)	(0.0069)
indrel100	0.018	-0.0091	-0.0090
	(0.020)	(0.011)	(0.010)
surfmagn	-0.056**	0.028	0.028**
	(0.025)	(0.018)	(0.013)
Potatocris(d)	-0.085	0.039	0.046
	(0.14)	(0.059)	(0.081)
<hr/>			
N	94		
pseudo R-sq	0.47		
Marginal effects; Standard errors in parentheses			
(d) for discrete change of dummy variable from 0 to 1			
* p<0.10, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01			
<hr/>			

Contrary to the vote on the final compromise, personal economic background did affect voting behavior on the amendments. All other things being kept constant at the mean, representatives with only industrial interests are 32% less likely to vote for the protectionist amendment and 27% more likely to prefer the 0,5 BEF amendment than the landowners. Representatives with a professional background show a similar but less outspoken (not statistically different from 0) preference. Representatives with a mixed background in land and industry are significantly more likely than representatives with an exclusive landownership background to prefer the protectionist option. The importance of both the production of wheat and rye and of livestock in the constituencies still proves to be an important factor in predicting preferences for the protectionist above the middle and liberalization amendments. As before, party affiliation has the most outspoken and significant effect: Liberal representatives are 56% less likely to vote for the protectionist option, and respectively 37% and 19% more likely to vote for the middle and liberalization options than Catholic representatives. The ordered probit on the amendments allows one to conclude that the underlying variables still work

in the same direction in 1850 as they did in 1834 and 1845. However, during the voting on the amendments in 1850 the representatives had more room to take their personal interests into account.

This leaves, then, the vote in 1857 as an apparent enigma. The strongest variable of the previous years, party affiliation, stopped functioning in 1857. While political color fails to predict the votes of the representatives, the effects of the personal economic background and the character of the constituencies become statistically much more robust than before (table 4). To explain these findings we need to point to the discussions on corn tariffs in the years immediately preceding 1857, when corn prices were extremely high (figure 1). The protectionists had based their demands for agricultural protection on the idea of justice, and not so much on any economic theory.⁴⁷ The leader of the protectionists during the 1850s, the Catholic Barthélemy Dumortier, was very explicit that he and his partisans always wanted to defend that part of the population that was suffering. During periods of high prices they wanted to protect the consumers with free imports and an export prohibition. Conversely, when prices were low and farmers would not receive the price they considered just, the protectionists wanted protectionist measures for the agricultural sector. By using this rhetoric Dumortier hoped to reinstate the sliding scale of 1834.⁴⁸

But Prime Minister De Decker pushed for free trade in 1856/57 when the corn prices were still very high, explaining why the free trade law made it through Parliament. In these circumstances many protectionists could not oppose free imports because of their own discourse on the need to protect the consumer in times of high prices. The role played by De Decker somewhat resembles the actions of Peel. De Decker was a leading member of the conservative party, but had opposed previous protectionist legislation. The bill of De Decker completely split the Catholic and the Liberal parties during the vote. This political confusion generated a large number of abstentions (19,8% of all votes)

⁴⁷ As is also remarked in the British context by Anna Gambles, *Protection and Politics*, p. 3.

⁴⁸ Dumortier, *APC*, 13 December 1855, p. 54. On this issue, see also: Delfosse, "État, crises alimentaires et modernisation de l'agriculture," pp. 71-95.

and allowed a significant number of representatives to follow their personal economic interest and the interests of their constituency.

4. Interpretation of the unanimous 1873 vote

In 1873 all remaining agricultural tariffs were removed. All representatives irrespective of their party affiliation or constituency now voted for free trade (leaving 3 abstentions in 1873 outside the analysis). After the 1850 vote, previous oppositions are on the wane. Table 6 shows that our strongest variable during the 1834, 1845 and 1850 votes, party affiliation, loses its force in 1857 and 1873. The number of abstentions in 1850 and 1857 is high, indicating an increasing hesitation on the part of both Liberals and Catholics about the right policy direction. The Liberals, who in general had a preference for trade liberalization, were extremely divided in 1857. In 1873 all Liberals were in favor of liberalization. More and more Catholics, who were outright protectionist in 1834 and 1845, began to defect to the free trade side starting in 1850. In 1873 all Catholics voted for free trade. How can we explain this development towards universal support for free trade in agricultural products?

Table 6: Votes by party

Party Year	Liberal Party			Catholic Party		
	Protectionist	Abstention	Liberalization	Protectionist	Abstention	Liberalization
1834	7	0	11	24	0	3
1845	9	0	21	36	0	4
1850	10	3	45	9	6	7
1857	12	7	19	16	10	22
1873	0	2	21	0	1	43

It is tempting to point to the previously mentioned rising share of the industrial sector in GDP. However, industrialization cannot explain the universal preference for free trade by 1873 because it was geographically concentrated in five or six constituencies, leaving some agricultural constituencies untouched until the last quarter of the century. In other districts, industrialization did

occur, but remained limited to some islands in an immense agricultural sea.⁴⁹ Nor did the agricultural structure change much between 1850 and 1873: it remained largely traditional until 1880, when the agricultural invasion and the introduction of new technologies started a very slow transformation process that was only completed after World War II.⁵⁰

What, then, can explain these changes? As many authors have argued for British Repeal, other factors outside interest based approaches have to be looked at. Here the econometric analysis needs to be supplemented once more with a qualitative analysis of the Parliamentary discussions and the press. Most importantly, we discuss the relationship of ideas to interests with reference to the votes over agricultural trade liberalization. By 1873 almost every representative, regardless of personal interest, party and constituency, was in favor of free trade. We cannot accept the proposition that all representatives voted against the perceived interests of themselves or their constituency.⁵¹ Therefore, we must conclude that their perception of these interests had changed. All representatives came to think that free trade was to their advantage and (more importantly) to the advantage of their constituency. This is a radically different approach from British research that makes a distinction between interests and ideas. In Belgium we see ideas driving a shift in the perception of interests.

How did opinion shift? Like McLean and Bustani did for the UK, we argue that in Belgium, the subsistence crisis of 1845-1848 played a part in shaking up the old ideas. Previously Belgium, and Flanders in particular, was thought of as an advanced agricultural economy. The American Henry Colman, who visited Europe in the 1840s, was impressed by Flemish agriculture, which he considered to be the best in Europe.⁵² Even King Leopold I remarked on the advanced state of agriculture in his 1843 speech before Parliament, two years before the subsistence crisis: “*Belgium,*

⁴⁹ For instance in the constituency of Leuven: Heyrman and Peeters, “Doorbraak van de industriële samenleving,” pp. 137-171.

⁵⁰ Blomme, *The Economic Development of Belgian Agriculture*, p. 300.

⁵¹ Another interpretation could be that the representatives stopped voting as delegates, representing the economic interests of their constituency, and began voting as trustees of the interests of the general public interest. However, this interpretation would still put ideas centre stage since the definition of the “interests of the nation” needs interpretation. On the difference between delegates and trustees, read Schonhardt-Bailey, “Ideology, Party and Interests in the British Parliament,” p. 582.

⁵² Colman, *De l’agriculture et de l’économie rurale en France, en Belgique*, p. 211.

so renowned for its agricultural progress.”⁵³ The subsistence crisis and the agricultural census of 1846 changed this perception for many politicians. The conclusion of the census was, for its architect Adolphe Quetelet, absolutely clear. In 1847 he published an official report stating that Belgian agriculture could not feed the growing population.⁵⁴

Quetelet’s interpretation remained contested for ten more years, but the subsistence crisis sparked a search for solutions.⁵⁵ One of the proposed solutions was the free trade policy furthered by Adam Smith’s disciples. But it was not a vague idea floating in the air that changed opinion and policy. Liberal ideology was carried out by a powerful nation, the UK, and very vocal pressure groups. The Repeal of the Corn Laws in the UK changed the status of political economy. Before Repeal the idea of free trade was considered a theoretical chimera by many representatives in Belgium.⁵⁶ Once the economic hegemon of the time chose free trade, it seemed the right policy on the way to industrialization for the young Belgian nation.⁵⁷ The British Repeal inspired a number of Belgian economists backed by industrialists from the Verviers district to start a campaign for free trade.⁵⁸ The young engineer and economist Adolphe Le Hardy de Beaulieu formed the *Association Belge pour la Liberté Commerciale*, which organized meetings in Brussels and elsewhere in the country that resembled the actions of the British Anti-Corn Law League. The association was backed by a small, but very vocal, group of representatives to the House. Free trade economists, among whom the immigrated Italian Giovanni Arrivabene, infiltrated the *Société Centrale d’Agriculture*, the most prominent learned agricultural society, that counted many members of Parliament in its ranks. The

⁵³ “La Belgique, si renommée par ses progrès agricoles.” Hymans, *Histoire parlementaire de la Belgique*. vol. 2, p. 240.

⁵⁴ “Rapport de la commission centrale de statistique au ministre de l’intérieur, sur la situation des subsistances”, *Bulletin Administratif*. 26 November 1847, pp. 96-99.

⁵⁵ Van Dijck, *De wetenschap van de wetgever*, pp. 159-171.

⁵⁶ Speeches in the House of Representatives on 10 December 1831 by Pirson and Lardinois, *Moniteur Belge*, 13 December 1831; On 18 April 1832 by Corbisier, A. Rodenbach and Osy, *Moniteur Belge*, 20 April 1832.

⁵⁷ Compare with scholarship on the possible motivation for UK Repeal based on international politics: Cain and Hopkins, “The Political Economy of British Expansion Overseas,” pp. 463-490; James and Lake, “The Second Face of Hegemony,” pp. 1-29.

⁵⁸ Erreygers, “Economic Associations in Belgium,” pp. 91-108; Erreygers and Mosselmans, “Economists in the Belgian Parliament,” pp. 49-74; Van Dijck, *De wetenschap van de wetgever*, pp. 53-68 and 364-369.

economist and journalist Gustave de Molinari commented continuously on Belgian economic policy in his journal *L'Économiste Belge* (1855-1868).⁵⁹ These economists aimed to eliminate all protectionist measures for agricultural and industrial products, and tried to forge ad hoc coalitions with agriculturalists, industrialists and the chambers of commerce to put pressure on the government.

The opinion that Belgium was confronted with a structural shortage in food production became more difficult to deny for the protectionists when the new subsistence crisis of 1853-1857 again pushed prices to worrying heights (see figure 1). Food rioters once more attacked bakeries, corn merchants, and market places in large and provincial cities.⁶⁰ The influential *Société Centrale d'Agriculture*, which became free trade oriented in the second half of the 1850s, confirmed the structural character of the shortage in food production in 1854: *"A sad truth, a truth full of menaces, is experienced by the people everyday. No one contests it, it is officially recognized. What the economists, who were thought to be theorists and dreamers, had dared to proclaim, is now proved by governmental statistics: the increase of the production of foodstuffs remains behind the increase of the population."*⁶¹ The most thorough analysis of the situation with references to the works of British political economists was written in 1855 by Edouard Ducpétiaux, a Catholic social scientist and general inspector of the Belgian charitable institutions. Like Quetelet, he was a member of the Central Statistical Commission that organized the censuses in 1846. He estimated the average shortage in wheat production to be about one tenth of the harvest.⁶² More and more representatives came to believe that the subsistence crisis had become endemic and that Belgian agriculture did not produce enough food, even in the case of good harvests, to feed the growing population.⁶³ In 1855

⁵⁹ Van Dijck, "From Science to Popularization, and Back," pp. 377-402.

⁶⁰ Deneckere, *Sire, het volk mort*, pp. 119-124.

⁶¹ *"Une triste vérité, une vérité pleine de menaces, est aujourd'hui acquise à l'expérience des peuples. Il n'est personne qui la conteste, elle est officiellement reconnue. Ce que des économistes, traités de théoriciens et de rêveurs avaient seul osé proclamer, les statistiques gouvernementales le prouvent. L'accroissement des subsistances n'est point en rapport avec l'accroissement des populations."* Speech of Max Le Docte on 14 May 1854. *Journal de la Société Centrale d'Agriculture* 1 (1854): p. 151.

⁶² Ducpétiaux, "Des subsistances, des salaires, et de l'accroissement de la population," pp. 441-590.

⁶³ This can be found in different speeches published in the Annals of the House of Representatives (*APC*): Rogier, 26 November 1853, pp. 79-80; Moreau, 24 November 1854, pp. 137-138, 10 December 1855, pp. 185-

Prime Minister Pieter De Decker acknowledged this as a fact.⁶⁴ The defense of protectionist corn tariffs became a difficult task in these circumstances, since free traders could depict tariffs as an unacceptable taxation on an already dear primary product.

The awareness of the structural shortage in corn production, British Repeal, the actions of the Belgian economists and the strategic move of De Decker opened the way for free agricultural trade in Belgium. In the 1860s front-rank economists confirmed that the option for free trade had been the best policy choice for Belgium. Auguste Orts, a Liberal representative and professor of political economy at the University of Brussels, told his students that “*The absolute liberty of trade has brought the results you can observe today*”.⁶⁵ Emile de Laveleye, professor of political economy at the University of Liège, wrote that economic facts had proved that free trade was productive of prosperity. The British example was telling in his mind.⁶⁶ The example of the UK was ubiquitous in Belgium in these years. The journal *L'Économiste belge* contended that British agriculture had become the best in the world thanks to economic freedom.⁶⁷ The prominence of the British economy was also explicitly present in Parliament: “*If England, which in the past recognized our superiority, has surpassed us today, this is because for a long time she has rejected the old doctrine of Protection and Subsidies.*”⁶⁸

186 and 18 December 1856, pp. 342-343; Lesoinne, 25 November 1854, p. 151 and 13 December 1855, p. 219; Prévinaire, 13 December 1855, pp. 225-226; Mascart, 13 December 1855, pp. 220-221; Anspach, 16 December 1856, p. 322; Frère-Orban, 18 December 1856, pp. 339-341; Delexhy, 17 and 18 December 1856, pp. 335-336 and 341.

⁶⁴ “Circulaire du ministre de l’intérieur relative aux denrées alimentaires”, *Pasinomie*. 3 October 1855, nr. 589, pp. 323-324.

⁶⁵ “*La liberté absolue dans le commerce a amené les résultats dont vous êtes aujourd’hui les témoins.*” *Cours d’économie politique professé à l’université de Bruxelles*, General State Archives, Brussels, *Papiers Orts*, nr. 386.

⁶⁶ De Laveleye, *Études historiques et critiques*, pp. 138-141.

⁶⁷ Estivant, “L’agriculture et l’État,” pp. 305-306.

⁶⁸ “*Si l’Angleterre, qui jadis reconnaissait notre supériorité, nous a devancé aujourd’hui, c’est que depuis longtemps elle a rejeté la vieille doctrine de la Protection et des Subsidies.*” Vleminckx, *APC*, 19 January 1866, p. 219. In continental Europe British economic superiority was widely acknowledged. For France, read: Crouzet, *De la supériorité de l’Angleterre sur la France*.

5. Conclusion

It proves to be difficult to use models based on narrow economic interests to explain the step to free trade in corn in the middle of the nineteenth century. British Repeal of 1846 is a notorious example. Political scientists and economists studying Repeal have had a hard time making their models fit. Many authors pointed to other factors influencing Repeal: ideas, institutions and political strategy. Only Schonhardt-Bailey has succeeded in explaining Repeal using economic models of decision-making. But in order to make her interpretation of 1846 work, Schonhardt-Bailey had to acknowledge that the Corn Laws had survived votes in the immediate years before 1846 because of conservative ideology.

The Belgian case adds to the evidence that interest based explanations of the liberalization of corn trade should not be taken at face value. The corn tariffs were a hotly debated issue in Belgian Parliament in the first three decades after independence. During these long discussions a protectionist policy was instated in 1834 and tightened in 1845. In 1850, after the subsistence crisis, the sliding scale was abolished. In 1857 the tariffs for corn were lowered to a purely “fiscal” level. After 1857, the discussions subsided and by 1873 all representatives had come to accept agricultural free trade. We conducted an econometric analysis of the roll-call votes on these tariff laws. Using biographical material and the 1846 censuses, we were able to construct detailed variables to measure the influence of party affiliation, personal pecuniary interests and the economic characteristics of the constituencies.

Personal interests of the representatives can only explain the direction of agricultural trade policy to a limited extent in the period under consideration. The economic characteristics of the constituencies partially explain tariff formation in 1834, 1845, 1850 and 1857. A constituency background with a high population, many leaseholders, and much cereal acreage and livestock increases the probability of a protectionist vote. Party affiliation is the most significant variable in 1834, 1845 and 1850. In

those years a Catholic (conservative) party affiliation increases the probability of a protectionist vote. But this effect disappears in 1857 and in the unanimous 1873-vote. We therefore share the view of McKeown and McLean and Bustani that other political factors and ideas should be taken into account. The definition of the subsistence crisis in Malthusian terms, a structural shortage in food production, made the protectionist position difficult to defend. Economic ideas as furthered by economists and the successful example of Great Britain, pointed in the direction of free trade in corn as the best policy option. But also, political strategy comes into play as the timing of the vote on the 1857-law was well chosen by Catholic Prime Minister De Decker, making his role comparable to that of Peel.

This paper has chosen, contrary to research on British Repeal, not to model ideas in its econometric analysis. Measuring ideas is famously difficult and the choice to see ideas either as an attitude towards religion (McLean and Bustani) or as a residual (Schonhardt-Bailey) raises many questions. Following international political studies we think it is difficult to separate ideas from interests. An interest cannot always be simply deduced from social-economic facts, without references to the ideas the actor holds of his place within the economy. As complexity of modern society rises, rational agents do not possess all necessary information, and so interests are not self-evident. One needs an interpretative framework that guides self-interest. The long research perspective of this paper allows us to document that the interpretation of interests changed after 1857, leading to the unanimous 1873-vote. The economic characteristics of most of the constituencies did not change radically between the highpoint of the discussions on corn tariffs (1834-1857) and the moment of the complete liberalization of these tariffs in 1873. It was therefore a shift in opinion underlying interests that needs to be taken into account.

Appendix: Constituency variable description and sources

Raw data series:

- surface: surface of the voting district, in km² (Source: *Exposé de la situation du Royaume*. Brussels: Lesigne, 1852, Title II, p. 18)
- population: total population of the voting district (Source: Population census of 1846: *Population. Recensement général (15 octobre 1846)*. Brussels: Ministère de l'Intérieur, 1849, pp. 184-248)
- popcity: total population in district living in cities (Population census of 1846, pp. 184-248)
- needy: total number of persons in district enrolled as needy in 1848 (Source: *Exposé de la situation du Royaume*, Title III, p. 252-261)
- agrisurftot: total surface of district employed for agriculture in 1846 (Source: Agricultural census of 1846: *Statistique de la Belgique: Agriculture. Recensement général 15 octobre 1846*. 4 vol. Brussels: Lesigne, 1850)
- surfwheat: total surface for growing wheat (Agricultural census of 1846)
- surfrye: total surface for growing rye (Agricultural census of 1846)
- surfpotatoes: total surface for growing potatoes (Agricultural census of 1846)
- cows: total number of milch cows of more than 2 years old (Agricultural census of 1846)
- pigs: total number of pigs older than 2 months (Agricultural census of 1846)
- surfprop: total surface of agricultural land owned by farmers (forests and wasteland excluded) (Agricultural census of 1846)
- surflease: total surface of agricultural land leased to the farmers (forests and wasteland excluded) (Agricultural census of 1846)
- surf1: number of agricultural enterprises working a surface less than 1 hectare (Agricultural census of 1846)
- surf2: number of agricultural enterprises working a surface between 1 and 5 hectares (Agricultural census of 1846)

- surf3: number of agricultural enterprises working a surface between 5 and 10 hectares (Agricultural census of 1846)
- surf4: number of agricultural enterprises working a surface between 10 and 20 hectares (Agricultural census of 1846)
- surf5: number of agricultural enterprises working a surface of more than 20 hectares (Agricultural census of 1846)
- indust100: total number of workers employed in sectors of on average more than 100 workers per enterprise (Source: Industrial census of 1846. *Statistique de la Belgique. Industrie. Recensement général (15 octobre 1846)*. Brussels: Ministère de l'Intérieur, 1851)
- voters47: number of voters in the district before the law of 12 March 1848, lowering the taxes payable to be able to vote to 20 florins (42,32 BEF) (Source: *Exposé de la situation du Royaume*, Title III, p. 16-19)
- voterscity47: number of voters in the district living in cities before the law of 12 March 1848 (Source: *Exposé de la situation du Royaume*, Title III, p. 16-19)
- voter48: number of voters in the district after the law of 12 March 1848, lowering the “kies cijns” to 20 florins (42,32 BEF) (Source: *Exposé de la situation du Royaume*, Title III, p. 16-19)
- votercity48 : number of voters in the district after the law of 12 March 1848 (Source: *Exposé de la situation du Royaume*, Title III, p. 16-19)

Constructed variables:

- popdensity = population/surface
- popcitrel = 100*popcity/population
- needyrel = 100*needy/population
- wheatryerel = 100*(surfwheat+surfrye)/agrisurftot
- potatoerel = 100*surfpotatoes/agrisurftot
- propratio = 100*surfprop/(surfprop+surflease)
- indrel100 = 100*ind100/population
- cityvoterel7 = 100*voterscity47/ voters47
- cityvoterel8 = 100*votercity48/ voter48
- surfmagn = 100*(surf4+ surf5)/(surf1+ surf2+ surf3+ surf4+ surf5)

- $\text{livestock} = \text{cows} + \text{pigs}$
- $\text{potatocris} = 1$ iff $\text{needyrel} > 25\%$ and $\text{potatoerel} > 4\%$
- $\text{gen lnpop} = \ln(\text{population})$
- $\text{gen lnlivest} = \ln(\text{livestock})$
- $\text{gen voterel7} = 100 * \text{voters47} / \text{population}$
- $\text{gen voterel8} = 100 * \text{voter48} / \text{population}$

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